

The Road Had a Clean Bill of Health for the Man Who Could Fight Like That

McKEON'S GRAFT

BY
JOHN RUSSELL

McKEON and the melancholy engine-driver swung the final shipment in through the door of the combined freight and baggage car.

"Es heavy," complained the engine-driver in his lugubrious English, looking reproachfully at the stumpy box. "Es worl' extra—to carry of that kind between our lands."

"Go on now, Esteban," growled McKeeon. "Be satisfied with your graft, can't you? And get steam on that old teakettle." He tossed a lone, lean mail sack in before making all fast.

The few ragged loungers who squatted in the dust and rolled interminable cigarettes out of newspaper looked on with languid interest. It was well known to them that the tossing of the mail sack was the signal for departure. Senor McKeeon always performed the ceremony with the mail sack when he was just about to abandon his duties as station agent, shipping clerk, postmaster and freight handler, and assume those of conductor, brakeman and express messenger. And there would be no other train for forty-eight hours.

McKeeon walked to the forward step and gave the signal. A doleful shriek from the whistle responded as the locomotive and two cars, with rattle and clank, staggered out across the plateau. Ticket pad and punch in hand, McKeeon stood in the doorway, looking over his collection of passengers from under bushy brows with calculating eye.

The usual crowd, apparently. Small planters from Buenaventura, small tradesmen from the plateau villages, chance workers in the mines, riff-raff of the mountains and the cattle plains, a motley carful.

McKeeon strolled down the aisle, marking the faces. Instinctively he graded his fares, from the coffee-colored mixtures of negro and Indian to the lemon-hued mestizos. And as he marked he recalled.

"Tints, as racial emblems, had no significance for McKeeon. But in one weighty particular he was concerned with the complexion of the patrons of the road. It had direct bearing upon his profit from the trip. It was a business consideration. And apparently luck was not with him this day. He noted an undue preponderance of lighter skins. That meant, naturally, more passengers who could not be bluffed with safety into paying twice the legal fare, more difficulty in fixing arbitrary freight rates, and less reward for a hard-working functionary like himself.

He was still gauging the possibilities when he came to the rear of the car and a face showed out of the smoke veil that had no part in the prevailing color scheme. A young man stood on the platform between the cars. A little man, and white—not only white, but pink, with a blue eye that twinkled engagingly.

McKeeon regarded him with casual interest, noting the riding suit of ducks that managed to fit so jauntily and the brand-new hat that set so snappily upon him.

"How're you, son?" he inquired, with ready address. "It's all the same to you, guess I'll ride outside. I'm not good on mixed flavors, and it's too variegous in there. Fine bunch of assorted ruffians you carry."

McKeeon nodded. "Prospectin'?" he inquired.

"Silver," returned the other. "Just came down through the mountains. Got through without a knife in my back, my luck." He shivered and laughed. "You don't see many Americans this way, you?"

"Not a dozen a year," McKeeon twitched his shoulders.

"Gotta like it," was his laconic answer.

He slouched back into the car and began to collect. The stranger leaned in the doorway to watch him.

It was worthwhile to watch McKeeon in pursuit of his profession. Tall, raw-boned, hard-eyed and bearded, he towered like a giant among the natives. Money he took and money he returned—no grudge, no grudge, he punched and distributed, to some. But always without argument, imperious, deliberate.

Shrill protests fell to silence before the slow glance. Expertly hands ceased to gesture at the shift of those big shoulders. There were few who grumbled after he had dealt with them. He proceeded by a masterful system of his own, did McKeeon, based on his knowledge of the people. And the men who might have made difficulty, recognized residents of the valley, had no cause to do so.

Only once was the transaction broken enough to interrupt the chatter and hum of talk through the car.

At the end section nearest the door sat four men in rough mountain dress, hardy citizens, who had lumbered the side with their knapsacks.

"This is freight, senores," announced McKeeon, calmly. And he proceeded to fix a price on the knapsacks.

One of the group, a thick, heavy-jawed individual, built like a weight-lifter, objected vigorously, giving McKeeon eye for eye, as if testing him. "Are you, then, sole owner of this road?" he demanded. "Must all give money as you ask? And what if we will not pay?"

McKeeon gathered the bell rope casually in his hand. "The senores are at liberty to throw down with their burdens," he answered. "I am told the walking is excellent and very good for the health."

The senores subsided and paid, murmuring one to the other.

When McKeeon returned to the middle platform the prospector was waiting for him with a gold piece. McKeeon took the money and returned him the proper change on his fare. But he did not take the trouble to punch a ticket. The prospector noted that detail with a whimsical smile.

"Pretty profitable business," he observed.

"So-so," returned McKeeon, undisturbed. "I've seen it better."

The train had jolted over the break of the plateau, winding down through natural gorges of the descent toward the coast. The locomotive went plunging and holding like a stubborn little mule with its ears laid back and its feet braced for bumps. McKeeon whirled the wheel on the primitive hand brakes to lighten its task and passed into the rear car.

The stranger followed him uninvited. There, amid piles of miscel-

laneous freight, bags of mineral specimens and stacks of hides, McKeeon established himself on the clumsy wooden box at which Esteban had complained and began to charge a black pipe. The prospector, smiling,

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Once more McKeeon leaped. And this time he huddled the unfortunate Tito before him like a bag of salt.

The prospector barked twice. Tito screamed, and was trampled under foot as McKeeon snaked a hand through the struggle and gripped the armed wrist. Interlocked, McKeeon and the leader caromed across the end of the car through drifting smoke and a bitter scent of scorched clothing, each straining for the instant advantage.

"Paulo!" gasped the leader. "Paulo!"

McKeeon whirled his man off his feet and stumbled backward just in time to escape the ripping stab of Paulo's knife as the bandit crept from behind.

It was madness then, in that single car, hung among the foothills of the

Andes in the empty quivering sunlight. By matching the agility, the speed of the two, McKeeon kept just ahead, battering from side to side of the narrow space like a demon unchained.

The leader crushed his chest with one mighty arm, thrusting his thigh at every foothold for a straight throw. The man had a body and limbs like iron. Once the twisting wrist levered around as McKeeon slipped, and he felt the sting of the gunpowder on his cheek when the gun spat again. And it was this opponent who must be hustled and carried as a barrier and a guard against the prowling, deadly knife.

"Paulo!" gurgled the leader. "Mostly they fought in silence—silence save for the heave and wheeze of painful breath, and always the whimpering moan of the little prospector, covering among the hides and watching the glittering knife with eyes of helpless horror.

Again and again that daring blade bit to the blood. But McKeeon, quivering and dodging, never weakened. He had driven for the thumb lock since the start, worked his huge, bony hand slowly—slowly, around the thick neck. And now, with thumb half bitten through, he had it.

For the tenth time the three living were down in a tangle with the body on the floor. And this time they did not rise. The leader's face was purple. His lips writhed, but no sound came. McKeeon was pressing home.

Paulo half lifted and winced the sweat from his blinded eyes. Bracing, he took distance.

An upfiring foot caught him on the side of the jaw, and with rattling teeth he yelped and folded backward.

McKeeon worked around until he had a knee on the broad chest of the

fourth man standing in the coach doorway, weapon leveled, and the startled, bobbing faces of the passengers inside.

"That is Jose," explained the leader, smiling. "He accompanies your engineer down the road some little distance. Far enough so that none shall witness what direction we take. You understand? Meanwhile—we have our knapsacks outside, and they are empty and spacious enough to hold all our fortune. See how foolish you were, senior. It would have been so much easier had you joined us. Now, simply, we shall have to reach the coast by walking, as you recommended. And as to you—"

He smiled.

McKEON took in the situation deliberately. He nodded and backed away from the end of the revolver, hands still up, leaving the narrow passage between himself and his captor. The car had lumbered to a stop under the pressure of hand brakes.

"It appears, senior, that you were right," he said resignedly. "Truly I did not believe that you could be so swift with a pistol!"

The leader was immensely gratified. His smile widened upon his teeth.

"Ah—you must not think that in your country alone is practiced the art. We also have the trick of it."

Tito, he added, aside, "tie me up that little fellow who flutters there among the hides—we will be gentle with him. And Paulo—do the same by our friend of the fifty pesos here, while I keep him contented."

Tito stepped obediently from the platform through the doorway. The leader, unthinking in his vanity, allowed him to step past the end of the revolver.

McKEON looked at the three. Over the heads of the group McKeeon was aware of the fourth bandit at work between the cars. A coupling pin clanked. The fourth man sprang to the passenger coach, a revolver gleaming in his fist. Presently there was a gasp, rapidly widening as the two who had shown knives tightened the brake wheel on the baggage car.

A hubbub of voices rose against the lessening pound of the locomotive. McKeeon had a glimpse of the

English, speaking thickly. "And y' thought, because I was plugging away at my own little graft—"

"I would say—what exactly do you desire me to do?"

"You can make it much easier for us, that is all. Join us, and we must do it to transship at Buenaventura. You shall also come on the steamer, quite safely to escape."

"You got good nerve, handling that outfit," remarked the prospector, raising his voice against the racket. "Ever had any trouble?"

"What trouble would I have?"

"Oh, I don't know. They look like pretty tough customers—some of them."

McKeeon twitched his shoulders and puffed slowly.

"Ain't civilized enough yet for that kind of trouble. They're only spigotties."

The prospector shivered and smiled. "Seems to me I'd put it the other way," he commented. "They're too civilized. They carry knives."

"Like the job?"

McKeeon twitched his shoulders.

"Gotta like it," was his laconic answer.

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